Resettling refugees: the evidence supports increasing our intake

Sandy Gifford

Refugees to Australia make a meaningful contribution to society. It’s time to take more. AAP/Julian Smith

Increasing our humanitarian settlement intake would help untangle the policy knot around irregular migration to Australia.

Over the past decade, humanitarian visas have been capped at about 13,500 per year. This quota includes offshore refugees and those granted visas under the Special Humanitarian Program (onshore convention refugees and their families regardless of mode of arrival, family members of resettled refugees and other persons living in situations of extreme discrimination). The quota cap within the humanitarian stream is problematic not least because of the increasing difficulties experienced by refugee settlers in sponsoring family members to join them.

By substantially increasing its humanitarian intake, Australia would lessen the burden on the two transit countries in our region, Indonesia and Malaysia, and thereby increase the chances for a regional humanitarian solution.

A substantial increase would reduce the need for irregular migrants to board unseaworthy vessels and ease the tensions arising from perceived competition for places between offshore convention refugees and the Special Humanitarian Program stream. Such an increase would also make family reunion a more realistic prospect for refugee settlers. This is important because there is strong evidence that family reunion is a key determinant of successful settlement.

The arguments for increasing our humanitarian intake raise three key issues: Australia’s capacity to support increased numbers of humanitarian settlers; the challenges faced by humanitarian migrants in Australia; and the settlement outcomes for these migrants.

These issues have been addressed by an impressive body of academic research into refugee settlement in Australia.

Klaus Neumann, James Jupp and others have documented the history of Australia’s refugee migrants, which total over 700,000 since the end of World War II. There are two key messages we can take from the historical research.

First, Australia has historically been able to settle much larger numbers of humanitarian migrants than it currently does. For example, up until 1952, at a time when Australia’s population was about a third of its current size, about 170,000 migrants arrived under the Displaced Persons scheme. Over the past 30 years, Australia’s largest humanitarian intake was in 1981-82, with close to 22,000 settled in a single year.

Second, each new wave of humanitarian settlers has been met with similar anxieties about whether they will fit in and whether Australia would be able to provide support in the early years. Yet the historical record shows that dire predictions – “there goes the neighbourhood” – have been largely unfounded.

There is a wealth of research on the challenges faced by refugee migrants in Australia. The mental health problems caused by past trauma and loss have been well documented as have the impacts of settlement on their psycho-social wellbeing. Other well documented difficulties include learning English, finding employment, securing affordable housing, negotiating health and social services, dealing with racism and, for young people, successfully achieving their educational aspirations.

A key lesson from this body of research is that on arrival, humanitarian settlers are more disadvantaged than other migrants. But research has also shown that humanitarian settlers arrive with high levels of optimism about
their future and high levels of wellbeing despite their traumatic pasts.

A few small-scale longitudinal studies have helped us to get a better picture of refugee settlement. Their findings support a large scale study recently completed by Graeme Hugo, which analyses the relevant published research, data on first and second generation humanitarian settlers drawn from a range of data bases, and data from a questionnaires and in-depth interviews.

The study found that compared to other migrants, refugee settlers are younger and will spend more of their working lives in Australia thus offsetting the effects of an ageing workforce. Refugee settlers are committed to staying in Australia and there is less "settler loss" compared to other migrants who move on or return to their own countries.

Increasingly, refugee migrants are moving into regional Australia thus bringing social and economic benefits to declining rural towns. Although unemployment is high in the early years, refugee settlers are finding employment.

Over time, economic participation rates are similar to those of the Australian-born population. They are more likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Importantly, they retain economic links with their origin countries.

Finally, they are active volunteers both in their own ethnic communities as well as in the wider community. The evidence suggests that over time, refugee settlers overcome the challenges they face in the first years after their arrival, and make important contributions to Australian society.

Overall, the academic research provides us with a sound body of evidence supporting a significant increase in the humanitarian migrant stream.

Increasing our refugee settlement intake is an important part of the larger solution for sorting out the current asylum deadlock. Increasing the humanitarian intake will not be problem-free. But no resolutions to messy social problems are.

We have met these challenges in the past and we can be confident, based on the scholarly evidence, that we have every chance of doing so in the future.

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